

# News Release

## New Mexico Congressional Delegation

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### NEW MEXICO CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION UNITED IN EFFORT TO ADDRESS FIRE RECOVERY NEEDS IN NEW MEXICO

WASHINGTON -- The New Mexico congressional delegation today met and agreed to work together to facilitate fire recovery needs for the families, businesses, and local and tribal governments affected by the disastrous forest and wildfires raging throughout the state.

The delegation agreed to a series of actions to begin the process of compensating victims of the Cerro Grande Fire that still burns in northern New Mexico after claiming hundreds of homes in Los Alamos. Two significant fires in southern New Mexico (Cree and Scott Able) have also caused extensive damage to thousands of acres of public and private property.

Members of the New Mexico congressional delegation who met today include: Senators Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman, and Representatives Joe Skeen and Heather Wilson, as well as Tom Udall, who joined the meeting via telephone from New Mexico.

"We have agreed to work collectively to do what must be done with reference to this terrible disaster surrounding Los Alamos and with the rather enormous fires occurring in the Ruidoso and Cloudcroft area, and other areas of the state," **Domenici** said. "We start with the premise that the Cerro Grande Fire was started by the Park Service, and as a consequence, in addition to the normal assistance available for disasters and emergencies, the federal government will have to pay damages and attempt, in some way, to make the people and the different units of government whole. We also have to make sure that the laboratory is restored and perhaps even made safer than it was in the past."

"The most valuable asset at this national laboratory, of course, is the people who work there, and we need to be sure that every step is taken to get them back to a situation that they can continue with their work, rebuild...and remain citizens of Los Alamos and our state," **Bingaman** said. "We have certain needs in the southern part of the state as well, with those forest fires, finding out the financial needs there and dealing with the losses there, and we want to give that a high priority. So we've got a long agenda of things to do. This was a very productive first meeting of our delegation on this."

"We want to get to the bottom of it and do the best that we can to remedy the situation to get people back to work again, and back to their homes again. So we're very much a solid group of people trying to understand what happened, what do we do to assuage the problem and get these people back in their homes. And also, hopefully, we will never have this same situation, where we got 55 mile an hour winds and people lighting fires is a real no-no," **Skeen** said.

"One of the things that has characterized this tragedy from the beginning is the way that New Mexicans have reached out to help each other," **Wilson** said. "I think the delegation meeting this afternoon and the list of principles agreed to was just further evidence of our willingness to do that and I look forward to working with all the members of the delegation until Los Alamos is back on its feet. The federal government needs to take responsibility and try to make people whole, and it should be done in a way that doesn't take long and doesn't require a lot of lawyers."

"I am bound and determined to see this process through as quickly as possible, so that the families, the retirees and everyone else whose lives have been put into disarray by

this catastrophe can get back a sense of normalcy,” **Udall** said.

The delegation also said it would request an in-depth report of the Interior Department’s investigation into the initial start and handling of the Cerro Grande Fire. In addition, the lawmakers will request a briefing of existing federal disaster and emergency aid available to victims, in order to determine where it may be necessary to fill in gaps associated with the unique situation created by the federal government being responsible for the Cerro Grande Fire.

In relation to fire damage throughout the state, the delegation agreed to work together on:

- Determining the immediate financial need of agencies (e.g. U.S. Forest Service, Federal Emergency Management Agency, local governments, etc.); and,
- Determine the needs for restoring land and watersheds (controlling erosion).

Specifically related to the Cerro Grande Fire, the delegation indicated that it will work on:

- Supporting continued monitoring of environmental impact and increased public disclosure;
- Seeking another FEMA center in Santa Fe, which may be more convenient for displaced Los Alamos residents;
- Establishing and ensuring an expedited process for meeting financial needs not covered by FEMA or insurance, which the delegation agreed to expedite; and,
- Rehabilitating and improving protection for LANL facilities.